

legacy



The heroism of
giving one's life
until one's last
breath to help
people think better

Tribute to Robert Swartz

Robert Swartz (1936 – †2022), held a PhD in Philosophy from Harvard University, was a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and was the creator, along with Sandra Parks, of the Thinking-Based Learning (TBL) methodology, which replaces teaching based on memory with teaching based on active thinking. He founded and directed the Center for Teaching Thinking (CTT), dedicated to promoting this methodology in the United States, Spain and countries around the world. For the past 30 years, he worked with teachers, schools and universities internationally on teacher development, curriculum reorganisation and education projects through the infusion of critical and creative thinking into the teaching of content.

by Ana Moreno Salvo and Toni Gallemí Sol

All of us who knew Bob agree on his great qualities as a thinker, educator and friend, but we know little about his life before TBL. What was young Bob like? What was his youth like? How did he get his start in thinking? How did he contribute to improving education in the world?

Robert Swartz was born in 1936 to a devout Jewish family in one of America's oldest towns, Sandwich, Massachusetts. He liked to say that he had grown up by the sea. Even as a child and adolescent, he loved to question things and think. At the age of 13, after his Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, he decided to stop practising his faith, but he somehow always felt linked to the history of the Jewish people. He says that on one of his trips he wanted to go to the Red Sea and got excited remembering the passage in the Bible when Moses leads his people through the waters. Then his parents moved to Boston and he attended the Boston Latin School, the oldest school in the country. From there, he was admitted to Harvard, where he studied philosophy, and a few years later earned his doctorate from the same university. He also spent some time studying at Oxford and Cambridge in England and took the opportunity to hitchhike around Europe. One day he met another traveller on his way to Spain and asked him: "What's in Spain?", to which the traveller replied, "there is a fair in Seville". So he went with him and fell in love with the country forever.

Although he claimed he was not cut out for marriage, he married twice and had two children from the first marriage: Jen, as he called her, and Alexander. He worked at several universities and started the philosophy department at two of them, and he retired in 2002 as professor emeritus from the University of Massachusetts.

HOW DO YOU ENTER THE WORLD OF THINKING?

Bob himself recounted his early forays into education in an article that Harvard University solicited for a book written by distinguished alumni on the sixtieth anniversary of his graduation.

In recognition of his contribution to improving education, Harvard asked him to write his ideas on secondary school learning for the chapter on education.

In it, Bob Swartz tells how it all began one day in 1976, when the direction of his professional life changed completely. At that time, he was a full professor and head of the School of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, and Kevin O'Reilly, a high school history teacher and good friend of his, invited him to attend one of his classes with his students one day. He wanted to show Bob something he had been planning for a while. At that time, they were studying the American Revolutionary War, specifically the battles of Lexington

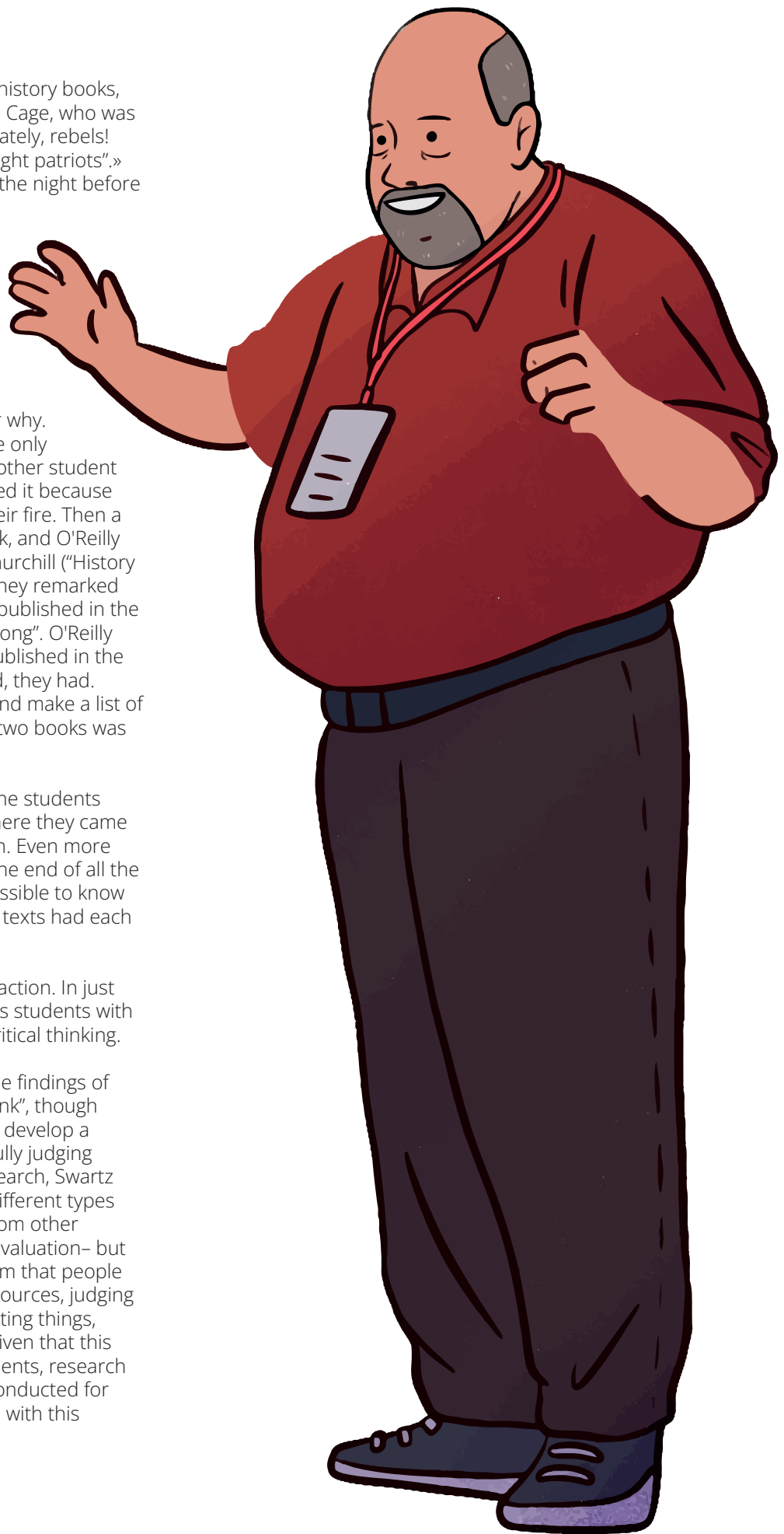
and Concord. They read the facts in their history books, highlighting the following: «British General Cage, who was on horseback, shouted: "Disperse immediately, rebels! Fire!" And the British troops fired "killing eight patriots".» Afterwards, O'Reilly told his students that the night before he had been reading that same historical event in other books. And he read one of them: "But in the confusion someone fired. The British returned fire and killed some 'settlers'. Then they marched on to Concord."

Then O'Reilly put the book down and asked himself who to believe. "Who fired first?" Then the students began to wonder why. One of them said that the second passage only said "someone shot", but not who. But another student spoke up, claiming that the "settlers" started it because the text said that the British "returned" their fire. Then a student asked who wrote the second book, and O'Reilly told them that the text was by Winston Churchill ("History of the English-Speaking Peoples"). When they remarked that it was English and that the book was published in the UK, they stated that "the book must be wrong". O'Reilly asked them if they had ever read a text published in the United States that was wrong, and, indeed, they had. O'Reilly urged them to think some more and make a list of things that might determine which of the two books was more reliable.

We won't dwell on what happened next: the students did extensive research on the authors, where they came from, where they had published and so on. Even more thought-provoking discussions arose. At the end of all the research, they concluded that it was impossible to know who fired first and that the authors of the texts had each made up their own story.

Swartz was impressed by the students' reaction. In just one simple class, O'Reilly had equipped his students with something they could use for a lifetime: critical thinking.

Swartz acknowledged that he looked to the findings of other researchers on "teaching how to think", though implying that what was paramount was to develop a special set of thinking skills, such as carefully judging the reliability of sources. Through this research, Swartz developed a broad conceptualisation of different types of thinking skills, using some categories from other researchers –like analysis, synthesis and evaluation– but identifying specific types of thinking in them that people use on a daily basis (such as reliability of sources, judging what causes something to happen, predicting things, making decisions and problem-solving). Given that this learning framework was intended for students, research on new instructional methods was later conducted for teachers so they could learn how to teach with this



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methodology.

The challenge or goal of this study was not simply to learn how to engage in this type of thinking but more importantly to use these thinking tools to foster engagement with what is being learned. It is not about teaching something to know it, but more like falling in love with what you are doing.

This learning, which could be perceived as closed because it is "critical thinking", is in no way at odds with creative thinking. On the contrary, creativity that harvests new and original ideas is insightfully complemented by criticism.

Over the following years, Swartz observed how teachers from different schools applied the new techniques, such as through metaphors and expressions steeped in our culture, demonstrating that our language is endlessly creative and can help us in our learning development. Teachers invited Swartz to their classes (in Lubbock, Texas; at La Vall School and Montserrat School in Barcelona; at Aix School in Palma de Mallorca; and even at a school in Lima, Peru). The techniques were applied equally in art classes (through drawings or analyses of works), literature classes (writing a poem) or science classes (with humans reaching the moon). These are just a few specific examples of Swartz's time in the world of education, which began one day in 1976.

Swartz's legacy is broad and extensive, and he demonstrated that good teaching can awaken students' interest, motivation and enjoyment of what they are learning. It does the same in teachers, who have to be guides, or rather gardeners, who carefully and painstakingly cultivate the guileless orchard growing before their eyes, which will bear new fruits in the not-too-distant future.

WHY DID HE END UP TRAVELING AROUND THE WORLD TEACHING PEOPLE TO BE GOOD THINKERS?

I remember that shortly before he died, when he was already in the residence, we had our last conversation by videoconference. As always, he was kind and affectionate, but I noticed something that I could not explain, something that had changed, and I don't mean his health, which had really declining: he could hardly see, and it was difficult for him to follow the thread of the conversation. The truth is, even though he was trying to smile and even be funny, I noticed he was sad. The previous month he

had been in Sandwich, Massachusetts, the same town where he was born, and had had to make important decisions, such as getting rid of all his things and coming to Madrid for good. For him, that trip was a major farewell, and his heart was aching. He told me that the effort had been enormous in every way, physically and emotionally.

I think it was the last time he talked about his beloved TBL. The idea was to interview him for an education magazine, but I decided to let him just talk and say whatever he wanted. I realised that he was truly in love with his TBL. It was his life, his passion. He had given up the comfort of a retired life as a professor emeritus to travel the world helping children and young people improve their thinking so they could live better lives. I admired him, and now I know that there was another reason, and it also moves me and helps me to love him even more. Bob, our Bob, had a son, Alexander, whom he loved dearly and who died in 2004 under tragic circumstances. That event was a severe blow from which he never fully recovered. He felt guilty that he had not been able to help him, to be there for him when he needed him most. Bob carried him deep in his heart and remembered him every day of his life. I think Alexander was the driving force behind his personal crusade to help children and young people to make good decisions. It would be ideal if we all did the same and cared for his legacy, for the good it does the world, for our friendship with Bob and for Alexander and so many like him who need someone to lend a hand.

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